

# THE RENDING<sup>1</sup>

By JAMES OPPENHEIM

From *The Dial*

THERE is a bitter moment in youth, and this moment had come to Paul. He had passed his mother's door without entering or even calling out to her, and had climbed on doggedly to the top floor. Now he was shut in his sanctuary, his room, sitting at his table. His head rested on a hand, his dark eyes had an expression of confused anguish, a look of guilt and sternness mingled. . . . He could no more have visited his mother, he told himself, than he could voluntarily have chopped off his hand. And yet he was amazed at the cruelty in himself, a hard cold cruelty which prompted the thought: "Even if this means her death or my death, I shall go through with this."

It was because of such a feeling that he couldn't talk to his mother. Paul was one of those sensitive youths who are delivered over to their emotions — swept now and then by exaltation, now by despair, now by anguish or rage, always excessive, never fully under control. He was moody, and always seemed unable to say the right thing or do the right thing. Suddenly the emotion used him as a mere instrument and came forth in a shameful nakedness. But the present situation was by all odds the most terrible he had faced: for against the cold cruelty, there throbbed, warm and unutterably sweet, like a bird in a nest of iron, an intense childish longing and love. . . .

You see, Paul was nineteen, the eldest son in a family of four, and his mother was a widow. She was not poor; they lived in this large comfortable house on a side street

<sup>1</sup> Copyright, 1920, by The Dial Publishing Company.  
Copyright, 1921, by James Oppenheim.

east of Central Park. But neither was she well off, and Paul was very magnanimous; he had given up college and gone to work as a clerk. Perhaps it wasn't only magnanimity, but also pride. He was proud to be the oldest son, to play father, to advise with his mother about the children, to be the man of the house. Yet he was always a mere child, living, as his two sisters and his brother lived, in delicate response to his mother's feelings and wishes. And he wanted to be a good son: he thought nothing was more wonderful than a child who was good to his mother. She had given all for her children, they in return must give all to her. But against this spirit of sacrifice there arose a crude, ugly, healthy, monstrous force, a terrible thing that kept whispering to him: "You can't live your mother's life: you must live your own life."

Once, when he had said something conceited, his mother had flashed out at him: "You're utterly selfish." This stung and humiliated him. Yet this terrible monster in himself seemed concerned about nothing but self. It seemed a sort of devil always tempting him to eat of forbidden fruit. Lovely fruit, too. There was Agnes, for instance: Agnes, a mere girl, with a pigtail down her back, daughter of the fishman on Third Avenue.

His mother held Agnes in horror. That her son should be in love with a fishman's daughter! And all the child in Paul, responding so sensitively to his mother's feelings, agreed to this. He had contempt for himself, he struggled against the romantic Thousand and One Nights glamour, which turned Third Avenue into a Lovers' Lane of sparkling lights. He struggled, vainly. Poetry was his passion: and he steeped himself in Romeo and Juliet, and in Keats's *St. Agnes's Eve* and *The Pot of Basil*. . . . It was then the great struggle with his mother began, and the large house became a gloomy vault, something dank, damp, sombre, something out of Poe, where a secret duel to the death was being fought, mostly in undertones and sometimes with sharp cries and stabbing words.

Now, this evening, with his head in his hand, he knew that the end had already been reached. To pass his

mother's door without a greeting, especially since he was well aware that she was ill, was so unprecedented, so violent an act, that it seemed to have the finality of something criminal. His mother had said two days ago: "This can't go on. It is killing me."

"All right," he flashed. "It sha'n't. I'll get out."

"I suppose you'll marry," she said, "on fifteen a week."

He spoke bitterly:

"I'll get out of New York altogether. I'll work my way through college. . . ."

She almost sneered at the suggestion. And this sneer rankled. He telegraphed his friend, at a little freshwater college, and Samuel telegraphed back: "Come." That day he drew his money from the bank, and got his tickets for the midnight sleeper. And he did all this with perfect cruelty. . . .

But now the time had come to go, and things were different. An autumn wind was blowing out of the park, doubtless carrying seeds and dead leaves, and gusting down the street, blowing about the sparkling lamps, eddying in the area-ways, rapping in passing on the loose windows. . . . The lights in the houses were all warm, because you saw only the glowing yellow shades: Third Avenue was lit up and down with shop-windows, and people were doing late marketing. It was a night when nothing seemed so sweet, or sane, or comfortable, as a soft-lighted room, and a family sitting together. Soft voices, familiarity, warm intimacy, the feeling of security and ease, the unspoken welling of love and understanding: these belonged to such a night, when the whole world seemed dying and there was only man to keep the fires burning against death.

And so, out of its tomb, the little child in Paul stepped out again, beautiful and sweet with love and longing. And this little child said to him: "Sacrifice — surrender — let the hard heart melt with pity. . . . There is no freedom except in love, which gives all." For a moment Paul's vivid imagination, which presented everything to him like works of dramatic art, pictured himself going down the steps, as once he had done, creeping to his

mother's bed, flinging himself down, sobbing and moaning, "Forgive me. Forgive me."

But just then he heard the stairs creak and thought that his eldest sister was coming up to question him. His heart began a frightened throbbing: he shook with a guilty fear, and at once he saved himself with a bitter resurgence of cruel anger. He hated his sister, he told himself, with a livid hatred. She always sided with his mother. She was bossy and smart and high and mighty. He knew what he would do. He jumped up, went to the door, and locked it. So — she could beat her head on the door, for all he cared!

He packed. He got out his valise, and filled it with his necessities. He would let the rest go: the books, the old clothes. He was going to start life all over again. He was going to wipe out the past. . . .

When he was finished, he anxiously opened his pocket-book to see if the tickets were safe. He looked at them. It was now ten o'clock. Two hours — and then the long train would pull out, and he would be gone. . . . To-morrow morning they'd come downstairs. His sister probably would sit at the foot of the table, instead of himself. The table would seem small with himself gone. Perhaps the house would seem a little empty. Automatically they would wait for the click of his key in the front door lock at seven in the evening. He would not come home at all. . . .

His mother might die. She had told him this was killing her. . . . It was so easy for him to go, so hard for her to stay. . . . She had invested most of her capital of hopes and dreams and love in him: he was the son; he was the first man. And now he was shattering the very structure of her life. . . .

Easy for him to go! He slumped into the chair again, at the table. . . . The wind blew strongly, and he knew just how the grey street looked with its spots of yellow sparkling lamplight; its shadows, its glowing windows. . . . He knew the smell of the fish-shop, the strange raw sea-smell, the sight of glittering iridescent scales, the beauty of lean curved fishes, the red of broiled lobsters,



the pink-cheeked swarthy fishman, the dark loveliness of Agnes. . . . He had written to Agnes. His mother didn't know of it, but he was done with Agnes. Agnes meant nothing to him. She had only been a way out, something to cling to, something to fight for in this fight for his life. . . .

Fight for his life! Had he not read of this in books, how the young must slay the old in order that life might go on, just as the earth must die in autumn so that the seeds of spring may be planted? Had he not read Ibsen's Master Builder, where the aging hero hears the dread doom which youth brings, "the younger generation knocking at the door"? He was the younger generation, he was the young hero. And now, at once, a vivid dramatization took place in his brain: it unwound clear as hallucination. He forgot everything else, he sat there as a writer sits, living his fiction, making strange gestures with face and hands, muttering words under his breath. . . .

In this phantasy, he saw himself rising, appearing a little older, a little stronger, and on his face a look of divine compassion and understanding, yet a firmness inexorable as fate. He repeated Hamlet's words: "For I am cruel only to be kind." Blame life, fate, the gods who decree that a man must live his own life: don't blame me.

He unlocked the door, crossed the big hall, stepped down the stairs. His mother's door was shut. The younger generation must knock at it. He knocked. A low, sad voice said: "Come." He opened the door.

This was the way it always was: a pin-point of light by the western window, a newspaper pinned to the glass globe of the gas-jet to shield his mother's eyes, the wide range of warm shadow, and in the shadow the two beds. But his sister was not in one of them. His mother was alone. . . .

He went to the bedside. . . .

"Mother!"

"Paul!"

He took her hand.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked.

"A little more quiet, Paul. . . ."

"I am very glad. . . ."

Now there was silence. . . . Then he spoke quietly, honestly, candidly. It was the only way. Why can't human beings be simple with one another, be sweetly reasonable? Isn't a little understanding worth more than pride and anger? To understand is to forgive. Surely any one must know that.

Starting to speak, he sat down on the chair beside the bed, still holding her hand. . . .

"Mother, come let's talk to one another. You think perhaps I have stopped loving you. It isn't true. I love you deeply. All this is breaking my heart. But how can I help it? Can't you see that I am young, and my life all before me? The best of your life is behind you. You have lived, I haven't. You have tasted the sweet mysteries of love, the agonies of death and birth, the terrors of lonely struggle. And I must have these, too. I am hungry for them. I can't help myself. I am like a leaf in the wind, like a rain-drop in the storm. . . . How can you keep me here? If you compel me, I'll become a shadow, all twisted and broken. I won't be a man, but a helpless child. Perhaps I shall go out of my mind. And what good will that do you? You will suffer more if I stay, than if I go. Oh, understand me, mother, understand me!"

His mother began to cry. She spoke at first as she always spoke, and then more like a mother in a poem.

"Understand? What do you understand? You know nothing about life. Oh, I only wish you had children and your children turned against you! That's the only way that you will ever learn. . . . I worked for you so hard. I gave up everything for my children. And your father died, and I went on alone, a woman with a great burden. . . . What sort of life have I had? Sacrifice, toil, tears. . . . I skimmed along. I wore the same dress year after year, for five, six years. . . . I hung over your sick-beds, I taught you at my knees. I have known the bit-

terness of child-bearing, and the bitter cry of children. . . . I have fought alone for my little ones. . . . And you, Paul! You who were the darling of my heart, my little man, you who said you would take your father's place and take care of me and of your sisters and brother! You who were to repay me for everything; to give me a future, to comfort my old age, the staff I leaned on, my comfort, my son! I was proud of you as you grew up: so proud to see your pride, and your ambition. I knew you would succeed, that you would have fame and power and wealth, and I should be the proudest mother in the world! This was my dream. . . . Now I see you a failure, one who cares for nothing but self-indulgence and pleasure, a rolling stone, a flitter from place to place, and I — I am an old woman, deserted, left alone to wither in bitterness. . . . I gave everything to you — and you — you give back despair, loneliness, anguish. I gave you life: you turn on me and destroy me for the gift. . . . Oh, mother-love! What man will understand it — the piercing anguish, the roots that clutch the deep heart? . . . I feel the chill of death creeping over me. . . .”

The tears rolled down Paul's cheeks. He pressed her hand now with both of his.

“Oh, mother, but I do understand! I have understood always, I have tried so hard to help you. I have tried so hard to be a good son. But this is something greater than I. We are in the hands of God, mother, and it is the law that the young must leave the old. Why do parents expect the impossible of their children? Does not the Bible say, ‘You must leave father and mother, and cleave to me’? Didn't you leave grandmother and grandpa, to go to your husband? Can't you remember when you were young, and your whole soul carried you away to your own life and your own future? Mother, let us part with understanding, let us part with love.”

“But when are you going, Paul?”

“To-night.”

His mother flung her arms about him desperately and clung to him. . . .

"I can't let you go, Paul," she moaned.

"Oh, mother," he sobbed. "This is breaking my heart. . . ."

"It is Agnes you are going to," she whispered.

"No, mother," he cried. "It is not Agnes. I am going to college. I shall never marry. I shall still take care of you. Think—every vacation I will be back here. . . ."

She relaxed, lay back, and his inventions failed. He had a confused sense of soothing her, of gentleness and reconciliation, of a last good-bye. . . .

And now he sat, head on hand, slowly realizing again the little gas-lit room, the shaking window, the autumn wind. A throb of fear pulsed through his heart. He had passed his mother's door without greeting her. And there was his valise, and here his tickets. And the time? It was nearly eleven. . . . A great heaviness of futility and despair weighed him down. He felt incapable of action. He felt that he had done some terrible deed—like striking his mother in the face—something unforgivable, irreversible, struck through and through with finality. . . . He felt more and more cold and brutal, with the sullenness of the criminal who can't undo his crime and won't admit his guilt. . . .

Was it all over, then? Was he really leaving? Fear, and a prophetic breath of the devastating loneliness he should yet know, came upon him, paralyzed his mind, made him weak and aghast. He was going out into the night of death, launching on his frail raft into the barren boundless ocean of darkness, leaving the last landmarks, drifting out in utter nakedness and loneliness. . . . All the future grew black and impenetrable; but he knew shapes of terror, demons of longing and grief and guilt loomed there, waiting for him. He knew that he was about to understand a little of life in a very ancient and commonplace way: the way of experience and of reality: that at first hand he was to have the taste against his palate of that bitterness and desolation, that terror and helplessness, which make the songs and fictions of man one endless tragedy. . . . Destiny was taking him, as the



jailer who comes to the condemned man's cell on the morning of the execution. There was no escape. No end, but death. . . .

He was leaving everything that was comfort in a bleak world, everything that was safe and tried and known in a world of unthinkable perils and mysteries. Only this he knew, still a child, still on the inside of his mother's house. . . . He knew now how terrible, how deep, how human were the cords that bound him to his mother, how fierce the love, by the fear and deadly helplessness he felt. . . . What could he have been about all these months of darkening the house, of paining his mother and the children, of bringing matters to such inexorable finalities? Was he sane? Was he now possessed of some demon, some beast of low desire? Freedom? What was freedom? Could there be freedom without love?

And now, as he sat there, there came slow deliberate footsteps on the stairs. There was no mistaking the sounds. It was Cora, his older sister. . . . His heart palpitated wildly, he shook with fear, the colour left his cheeks, and he tried to set his face and his throat like flint not to betray himself. She came straight on. She knocked.

"Paul," she said in a peremptory tone, clothed with all the authority of his mother. . . .

He grew cold all over, his eyelids narrowed; he felt brutal. . . .

"What is it?" he asked hard.

"Mother wants you to come right down."

"I will come," he said.

Her footsteps departed. . . . He rose slowly, heavily, like the man who must now face the executioner. . . . He stuck his pocketbook back in his coat and picked up his valise. Mechanically he looked about the room. Then he unlocked and opened the door, shut off the gas, and went into the lighted hall.

And as he descended the steps he felt ever smaller before the growing terror of the world. Never had he been more of a child than at this moment - never had he longed more fiercely to sob and cry out and give over

everything. . . . How had this guilt descended upon him? What had he done? Why was all this necessary? Who was forcing him through this strange and frightful experience? He went on, lower and lower. . . .

The door of his mother's room was a little open. It was all as it had always been — the pin-point of light, the shading newspaper, the sick-room silence, the warm shadow. . . . He paused a second to summon up strength, to combat the monster of fear and guilt in his heart. He tried with all his little boyish might to smooth out his face, to set it straight and firm. He pushed the door, set down the valise, entered: pale, large-eyed, looking hard and desperate.

He did not see his sister at all, though she sat under the light. His mother he hardly saw: had the sense of a towel binding her head, and the dim form under the bed-clothes. He stepped clumsily — he was trembling so — to the foot of her bed, and grasped the brass rail for support. . . .

His mother's voice was low and thick; a terrible voice. Her throat was swollen, and she could speak only with difficulty. The voice accused him. It said plainly: "It was you did this."

She said: "Paul, this has got to end."

His tongue seemed the fork of a snake, his words came with such deadly coldness. . . .

"It will end to-night."

"How . . . to-night?"

"I'm leaving. . . . I'm going west. . . ."

"West. . . . Where?"

"To Sam's. . . ."

"Oh," said his mother. . . .

There was a long cruel silence. He shut his eyes, overcome with a sort of horror. . . . Then she turned her face a little away, and he heard the faintly breathed words . . .

"This is the end of me. . . ."

Still he said nothing. She turned toward him, with a groan.

"Have you nothing to say?"

Again he spoke with deadly coldness . . .

"Nothing. . . ."

She waited a moment: then she spoke . . .

"You have no feelings. When you set out to do a thing, you will trample over every one. I have never been able to do anything with you. You may become a great man, Paul: but I pity any one who loves you, any one who gets in your path. You will kill whatever holds you — always. . . . I was a fool to give birth to you: a greater fool to count on you. . . . Well, it's over. . . . You have your way. . . ."

He was amazed: he trembling there, guilty, afraid, horrified, his whole soul beseeching the comfort of her arms! He a cold trampler?

He stood, with all the feeling of one who is falsely condemned, and yet with all the guilt of one who has sinned. . . .

And then, suddenly, a wild animal cry came from his mother's throat. . . .

"Oh," she cried, "how terrible it is to have children!"

His heart echoed her cry. . . . The executioner's knife seemed to strike his throat. . . .

He stood a long while in the silence. . . . Then his mother turned in the bed, sideways, and covered her face with the counterpane. . . . His sister rose up stiffly, whispering:

"She's going to sleep."

He stood, dead. . . . He turned like a wound-up mechanism, went to the door, picked up his valise, and fumbled his way through the house. . . . The outer door he shut very softly. . . .

He must take the Lexington Avenue car. Yes; that was the quickest way. He faced west. The great wind of autumn came with a glorious gusto, doubtless with flying seeds and flying leaves, chanting the song of the generations, and of them that die and of them that are born.